Demonstrating impact through communications

How to measure the impact of your communications, and the indicators to collect

> What is the point of my research if I don't communicate the findings? I do this because I want to make a difference. I want to move thinking on. It's also about demonstrating value for money for the research. We need to give this whole area more imagination, thought and time. We have to go beyond the academic paper to reach the people who have the power to use the findings and make something happen.

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Research Councils UK defines research impact as 'the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy'.

With the rising importance of impact in assessing research excellence in the UK, researchers are increasingly expected by their host organisations and research funders to track and demonstrate the impact of their research.

This might be in the form of academic impact, where the research has meaningfully shifted understanding and/or advanced thinking in a specific academic discipline. Or it might also be in the form of social and economic impact, where the research is seen to make a wider contribution to the economy or society.

Traditional, established channels for achieving academic impact are academic conferences and journals. Achieving wider societal impact often requires broader engagement and communication to influence the understanding, practice and behaviour of policy, professional or public audiences.

By understanding how to track what you are achieving with your communication of research findings across these wider audiences, you can determine some measures that demonstrate the value, influence and impact of your research.

Communications objectives and indicators

Opportunities for impact can arise through your communications at any stage of the research process.

This means being as clear as you can be about your **communications objectives** from the outset, and identifying the indicators you need to track to demonstrate where you have achieved impact.

The communications indicators you aim to collect should flow from the communications objectives you set. The following table contains examples of communications indicators. They might provide an important subset of your broader research impact measures.

Gathering impact measures on your communications outputs, and on how your audiences respond to them, can be relatively straightforward. However, collecting impact measures on outcomes might not be feasible for many studies, due to the time and resource involved. For some research studies, it can also be very difficult to isolate the specific contribution communicating the research has had on changes in policy, practice or behaviour.

	Outputs	Outtakes	Outcomes
Indicators to collect	What you put out that is received by your target audiences	Responses and reactions of the target audiences	The effect of the communication on the target audiences
Quantitative	• Articles accepted for publication • Events held, and type and number of attendees • Media articles or broadcast items achieved and potential size of audience • Social media posts or tweets • Website click-throughs	• People requesting or downloading information • People liking, sharing or commenting on a social media post • Time visitors spend on a web page	• People whose perceptions have changed (attitude) • People changing behaviour and any associated impact • People taking an action (eg registering for an activity)
Qualitative	• Event feedback forms (ie positive comments received on the design of the event) • Messages about the research included in media coverage • Tone of media coverage	• Audience's ability to recall content of communication, eg from a research event (awareness) • Email, letter or online post received from stakeholder welcoming the research • Journalist highlights need for policy change in article prompted by the research findings • A representative of a professional body discusses the research in a conference speech to their networks	• Research referenced as evidence in a government paper that is directly informing policy • An opinion former endorses the research in a way that influences others to change policy • A professional society adapts its formal guidance to health care professionals in response to the research

Communicate your research with our toolkit at www.health.org.uk/research-kit

Evaluating the impact of your communications activity in its own right is also an important way to help ensure that you are investing time in the right activities, and to capture any learning to inform future communications and engagement work.

Resources

- The International Association for the Measurement and Evaluation of Communication has developed **an interactive online framework for evaluating communications activity**. Users can submit their objectives, outputs and impact measures into this free tool and generate a PDF report.

- The tool is supported by a range of resources, including a more **detailed taxonomy of evaluation**, which lists potential metrics and evaluation methods.

- The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has developed an **online pathways to impact toolkit** for researchers. It includes advice on how to develop an impact statement for applications as well as guidance on planning evaluation activity.

- The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement has produced **guidance for those evaluating public engagement activity**.